

Biotechnology firm finds its catalyst

When Dr. Ali Tehrani and his team started Zymeworks in 2004, they weren't sure their small start-up could get the attention of the big biotechnology players in California. But just three years in, and with some help from Canada's Trade Commissioner Service, the Vancouver-based firm's molecular simulation software is more visible than ever.

Zymeworks' focus is to develop industrial enzymes for specific market needs and applications using molecular simulation software.

"Enzymes are natural protein molecules that act as catalysts in biochemical reactions," says Dr. Tehrani, CEO of Zymeworks. "But nearly every manufacturing process in every industry depends on one or more chemical reactions as well. These reactions have traditionally used unnatural chemical-based catalysts that are toxic, energy intensive and expensive to maintain and dispose of," he says.

Tehrani points out that enzymes are the most viable alternative to chemical-based catalysts to reduce costs and environmental impact, and to significantly improve product purity and quality.

In the pulp and paper industry, for example, chemical agents used to make paper white are usually made from chlorine dioxide, which can then seep into soil and water systems. Zymeworks' technology can replace the toxic bleaching chemical with a natural enzyme that accomplishes the same thing without damaging eco-systems.

The catalyst for change

But developing a good product is one thing, selling it is quite another. Tehrani says knocking on biotech doors in California can be daunting, considering that it is one of the world's biggest and most sophisticated clusters for biotechnology. He explains that promotional packages can be sent out, but they usually go no further than the secretary.

For Tehrani, this is where the Trade Commissioner Service was indispensable. He was first approached by the Trade Commissioner Service at a trade event and that proactive help is starting to pay off for Zymeworks.

"The Trade Commissioner Service put us in contact with the right people and that is opening doors for us now. The best way to put it is you could have one or two good full-time business development employees, and/or you could have trained professional in the Trade Commissioner Service who provide you with information and open doors for you. The best part is that you don't have to pay for it and you can use the saved time and money to attend meetings."

Zymeworks is now well on its way to licensing the right to produce and use its proprietary enzymes. The company is also looking to make strategic partnerships with established chemical or pharmaceutical companies for bio-product research, development and commercialization.

Dr. Tehrani says companies in California like Diversa, Genencor

International and Biomarin are trend setters in the world of industrial biotechnology.

"These companies are proof that there is money to be made in this field. Establishing a relationship with them gives us credibility within our market and the investor community," says Tehrani.

He adds that credibility, not to mention the saved time and money, makes the Trade Commissioner Service a valuable tool for those looking to take their business out of Canada.

"There are hidden jewels in California that will be very hard to find by non-local groups without the help of experts. The Trade Commissioner Service is the best connection for Canadian companies to find these great business collaborators and opportunities."

For more information, go to www.infoexport.gc.ca and www.zymeworks.com. ◀



In 2004, Dr. Ali Tehrani started Zymeworks, a biotech firm that has benefited from the Trade Commissioner Service.

Iroquois cranberries cause a stir

Iroquois Cranberry Growers, owned and operated by the Wahta Mohawks of central Ontario, began by planting half an acre of vines in the 1960s. Their farm has since expanded to over 68 acres, providing increased employment opportunities for community members.

While Iroquois Cranberry Growers has been selling its basic product—fresh and frozen cranberries—in the international marketplace for some time, it is identifying and pursuing new markets for its value-added products with the help of the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service.

It all began in 2001, when Marketing Manager Linda Commandant was preparing to take part in SIAL Montreal, one of the food industry's major annual trade fairs. Before the show, Commandant did some pre-show promotion with a number of trade commissioners who were meeting in Ottawa.

"I arranged to have samples of our products at the meeting so they would be familiar with our company prior to the show and it all took off from there."

Based on discussions at the trade fair, Commandant established working relationships with the trade commissioners who have clients with an interest in cranberries. She says the market with the most immediate potential was Poland.

"Trade commissioners are better acquainted with the market and can tell me if I'm reading the markets correctly," says Linda Commandant of Iroquois Cranberry Growers.

"The trade commissioner had firm contacts with a buyer interested in our juice. We are now figuring out the size, price and packaging that will work best in that market. It takes a while to develop confidence in international relationships. You have to meet, talk through how you could work together and what you have to offer before supply arrangements can be established. The Trade Commissioner Service has been helping us throughout this process."

Commandant takes a methodical approach to identifying potential clients. She focuses on the health-food industry and studies high-end product trends.



"I do my initial research independently. When I get to the point that I feel ready to make contacts in a new market, I talk to the Trade Commissioner Service. It serves as a sort of check and balance—the trade commissioners are better acquainted with the market and can tell me if my thinking rings true, if I'm reading the markets correctly."

Commandant is pleased with the immediacy of the response she gets from the Trade Commissioner Service.

"Even when they don't know the answer, they reply right away and tell me how long they will need to figure it out. I'd advise anyone looking to export to check with the Trade Commissioner Service before they spend a dime—find out what the market is really like before you invest."

In terms of emerging markets, she has her eye on Southeast Asia. "There is such a high level of health awareness and interest in health-promoting products—our premium, pure, unsweetened juice, with its natural health benefits, should spark consumer interest."

As for its plans for the future, she says Iroquois Cranberry Growers is looking to find an affordable way to take part in more international trade shows, as the food industry holds two key shows every year that attract all of the important buyers.

"If you don't take part, you fall off the international radar," says Commandant.

For more information, go to www.infoexport.gc.ca and contact Linda Commandant, Iroquois Cranberry Growers, tel.: (705) 762-2354, email: Linda@iroquoiscranberries.com, website: www.iroquoiscranberries.com. ◀